

~~-YALE COLLEGE-~~ DEMOCRATS

March 3, 2014

Testimony of Tyler Blackmon
Yale College Democrats

68 High Street, Suite D31
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In favor: H.B. No. 5221
An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Connecticut Sentencing
Commission Regarding Lengthy Sentences for Crimes Committed by a Child or
Youth and the Sentencing of a Child or Youth Convicted of Certain Felony Offenses

My name is Tyler Blackmon, and I strongly urge the committee to support House Bill 5221 on behalf of the Yale College Democrats, who have been working to bring juvenile justice reform to the attention of legislators for a number of years now.

I cannot claim to be an expert on child psychology, on the criminal justice system, or even on Constitutional Law. But I can claim to be an expert on what it means to be a teenager. I am now only 19 years old. That means just two years ago the state of Connecticut could have sentenced me to prison for life without parole. Quite frankly, that scares me to death, particularly when I think back to the kind of mistakes I've made in my youth.

No doubt several other expert submissions will testify on the merits of juvenile justice reform. They will tell you, not incorrectly, that this bill will bring much-needed reforms to the way we treat under-age citizens of the state of Connecticut and bring our state in line with the Constitution of the United States of America.

And those testimonials aren't wrong. But it seems to me that a debate on whether or not juvenile justice reform is good for our state has come and gone. In fact, we had that very same debate last year in the General Assembly. During the last session, the House of Representatives debated a bill that would have forced our system to evaluate a minor's age as a factor when setting sentences. The bill passed 137-4, and I was ecstatic. The issue, it seemed to all of us working so hard on the bill, had been settled. Finally we had seen a bipartisan coalition of sensible legislators coming together to support common sense reform.

However, the bill never made it into law—it died in the Senate because that body refused to take the bill to a vote.

The process last year taught me an important lesson: the legislators in this room already understand the merits of this bill. What may not be coming across is the urgency.

So, to prove how urgent this is to young people, we did a little work.

On Monday, March 3, I will come to Hartford with 451 signed letters from young people in the state of Connecticut who want change now. 451 young people are frustrated that a bill with no significant opposition still hasn't come to fruition. These are letters from Democrats, from Republicans, and from people who have never cared about any other political issue in their lives. But all of them cared enough to say enough is enough, that juveniles are not adults, and that we don't want to wait until it is convenient for lawmakers to pass this bill because a life sentence for a minor is never convenient.

Put H.B. 5221 on the Calendar. Call it to a vote. And let's get it right this time.